

Hiring the Right People for the Right Reasons

Andi Fletcher...

When I was hired as the first director Sacramento START, one of California's pioneering afterschool programs, the most pressing issue was how to hire the best possible people in the shortest possible time – a challenge many of you are facing right now. I had six weeks to fill positions at 20 sites with 120 staff members. We met that target, and I learned a lot about what works and what doesn't. I've learned even more over the past several years working as a consultant to hundreds of new and established programs. I'm convinced that two things matter more than anything else: Hiring from neighborhoods where your sites are located and hiring for attitude over experience.

The advantage of hiring locally is huge. It ensures that the racial, cultural and linguistic diversity of your staff reflects the student population, contributing in important ways to creating and maintaining an emotionally safe environment and developing supportive relationships between adults and children and young people. It reconnects neighborhoods with the schools, providing pathways for parent involvement and helping them become better partners in their children's education. It provides jobs for low-income families and for local community college and university students. And, it increases your staff's commitment to your program. The impact is powerful – student attendance increases, and so does staff retention and program quality.

With this geographic focus in hiring, the question is how to select the right individuals. There's a real difference in what you should be looking for in Site Directors and Program Leaders—those folks who work directly with students. The primary responsibilities of Site Directors are to develop a high performing staff, to work effectively with Principals and teachers to develop an authentic partnership, to build positive relationships with community members and to set and achieve meaningful goals that contribute to program quality. The best Site Directors are inspirational leaders; effective managers, team-builders and coaches; and partnership developers. They're open to learning and committed to excellence. They have a strong sense of personal responsibility. They get along well with people and are passionate about making a difference. And, perhaps most importantly, they understand that their success depends on the success of those who work for and with them.

The best advice I can give on choosing Program Leaders is to hire for attitude and train for skills. Regardless of their formal qualifications, previous experience or credentials, their real work is about engaging and supporting students and helping them build their skills and self-confidence, expand their knowledge and increase their enthusiasm for learning. People who do this especially well have a very positive outlook on life, a talent for meeting children and young people where they are and a real commitment to helping students succeed. Look for these qualities in interviews and it will make all the difference in hiring the right people and getting the new year off to a great start!

CynDee Zandes...

Jim Collins, author of Good to Great, sums up the importance of hiring the "right" staff when he says, "If we get the right people on the bus, the right people in the right seats and the wrong people off the bus, then we'll figure out how to take it [the bus] someplace." (Pg. 41) This advice holds true with afterschool programs as completely as it sheds the truth on hiring practices in for-profit companies. And the bus for afterschool programs is going to a place of quality and excellence that impacts the lives of the young people and families that it serves.

Hiring the right people begins with your clarity about what type of a person you believe can most successfully and effectively work with the students in your program. We can learn a lesson from the Disney Corporation. Disney does not hire staff; it rather casts people in the role of someone who has "positive attitudes to make every guest's experience as memorable as possible. [Disney] looks for happy, personable people who will demonstrate their willingness to do everything they can to help guests and fellow Cast Members." (Disney World Web Site www.wdwip.com/disneyjobs.htm).

We too should cast people in the role of competent, caring adults who want to make a difference in the life of a child. With this in mind, the first priority when hiring afterschool staff is finding people who are positive role models, who can inspire young people to embrace their own potential by the way they lead their own lives. This role model can come from the neighborhood where the child lives and plays, from a local community or four-year college, and the community at large. Hiring both community members and college students provides a balance that serves students well as you build a quality afterschool program.

Secondly, you are looking for staff who want to share experiences with children, guiding young people to learn by doing, while all the time being open to learning from the young people as well. When staff and young people co-create the afterschool program it becomes a powerful vehicle for developing the capacity of all involved to succeed. Third, you want staff who will hold children in unconditional positive regard, and treat them with respect and dignity, especially when the child becomes adversarial.

So, be clear about the qualities you are looking for in afterschool staff. Look for people who want to make a difference, who have a strong work ethic, who live their lives with integrity, curiosity, striving for excellence, building relationships, valuing differences, embracing challenges, taking healthy risks, and are learners. With these people as solid role models, your students will thrive.